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Sage, Henry M.

Feeblemindedness and the state

New York, N.Y.

[1917]

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FEEBLEMINDEDNESS AND THE STATE

ADDRESS BY

HON. HENRY M. SAGE

CHAIRMAN HOSPITAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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Box 345

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

STATE CONFERENCE OF CHARITIES AND CORRECTIONS

BINGHAMTON, N. Y.

NOVEMBER 15, 1917

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STATE CHARITIES AID ASSOCIATION

105 EAST 22ND STREET

NEW YORK CITY

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FEEBLEMINDEDNESS AND THE STATE*

BY HON. HENRY M. SAGE

CHAIRMAN HOSPITAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

In 1854, the State of New York took its first step in the care of the feebleminded. Since that time so much has been done for the insane and for every class ill equipped for life's struggle, except those of defective mentality, that our progress in this line is far from satisfactory if we believe that the State of New York should, as the richest state in the Union, be first in the intelligent care of its dependents. To this result there are several contributing causes.

In the first place it is comparatively easy to discover that a human being is mentally diseased, and consequently the menace to the State in allowing such people to be at large was soon recognized and institutions were built and the proper machinery installed in order to remove as perfectly as possible this menace from our civilization. But it is not so easy to discover those who are merely below the standard in mental development, which standard cannot be absolute, and must vary according to the advance or retardation in the civilization of different communities.

FEEBLEMINDEDNESS MISUNDERSTOOD

Second. Feeblemindedness has been for all these years and is still to a great extent misunderstood by the population at large. A great many people today still think that feeblemindedness, especially in its higher grades, is merely a dullness of mental faculty and is not an incurable defect. This misconception has not been greatly clarified by those who have studied the problem because the conclusion arrived at by each group has been different from that of any other group.

*Address delivered before the State Conference of Charities and Corrections, Binghamton, N. Y., November 15, 1917.

In consequence those of us who are in a position to institute the necessary legislation for the mitigation if not for the cure of this cancer in our body politic are as much confused as the rest of the population and do not know what should be done.

Third. There has been a growing conviction in the Legislature for some years that "Something should be done for the feebleminded," but no one has known what, and with the fear that whatever is done will result in enormous expenditures the Legislature has put aside for other things which were more clearly presented to the understanding, this serious problem. This has been done partly because so many other things were pressing for decision and partly because it is always difficult except on a clear-cut issue to commit the State to a policy of large expenditure when the cry is all for economy. Several active associations have, in the last few years, carried on a constantly more effective propaganda looking toward action in this matter and at last this propaganda has reached almost every district in the State. Today there is a real and growing demand from every community which has felt the menace of this blight that the State should take the matter firmly in hand and do its plain duty. But the duty is far from plain.

NO STATE POLICY

When the Hospital Development Commission was formed last Spring, primarily to find ways and means to put the insane hospital system on a more efficient basis and to provide for the frightful overcrowding in some of the State Hospitals, this Commission was also directed to attempt a solution of the feebleminded problem. As you know, each one of the institutions for the care of the feebleminded in the State is going its own way. Each is run, within certain limitations decreed by the law which created it, in accordance with the views of its superintendent and the board of managers, subject only to fiscal control by the Fiscal Supervisor and to powers of visitation and advice from the State Board of Charities. *There is no comprehensive, cohesive scheme of State control. There is no State policy and the searcher after truth on these troubled*

waters is buffeted by airs coming from every quarter of the compass, by theories the truth of which he is not equipped to judge, and by demands which he cannot grant until he knows that he is right.

The Hospital Development Commission has spent its vacation in a close association with the insane and feebleminded all over the State of New York. It has visited Canada. It has visited Boston and gone through the institutions at Waverley and Wrentham, and has only been deterred by lack of time from visiting the institutions in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. While of course the larger amount of time has been consumed in inspecting insane hospitals, it has kept in mind the direction to attempt a solution of the feebleminded problem.

Whatever I say at this meeting must be considered only as my personal view. The commission as a commission has not yet considered a solution of the problem. We have seen the institutions; we have talked to the superintendents; we have had a public hearing in New York and we have endeavored to collect all the information available. We have come to one decision one day and on the next have entirely changed our minds, and I will only endeavor now to give a summary of these impressions, without attempting to detail exactly what I think the State should do. My own conclusions may be modified before January first.

When we started on our pilgrimage I had an idea that, given a certain number of feebleminded in the State of New York, it was the State's duty to discover them, shut them up and keep them segregated until this generation died out. According to a census, not an actual census but a comparative one, made by the State Charities Aid Association, the latest figures we have on the feebleminded in this State indicate that we have a population of these unfortunates of approximately 35,000. If our task was simply this: Say we have 35,000 feebleminded—let us build institutions for them and shut them up; the problem would merely be one of money. It is easy to figure that at $500 a bed we would have to appropriate twenty million dollars to build the institutions

and then catch our defective population and place them in these institutions for life. This would be quite a burden on the State when you also consider the fact that the initial cost of these institutions is only a beginning. The upkeep becomes almost prohibitive but the thing could be done.

We find however that the problem is not so simple as this, and we also find that in a great many of its aspects it is much more encouraging. There has been a great change in the last few years in the attitude of all who have studied and are in a position to advise on this problem. Long ago the idea that the feebleminded could be educated so as to be no longer feebleminded has been abandoned. It is recognized by all that, while a person of the mental age of ten cannot by education achieve a higher age, he can be made a very efficient child of ten. Therefore there is no question of the value of education. We also find, and we have heard no denial of this finding, that it is not necessary or advisable to shut up all the feebleminded. Many can get the proper education at school, especially now that we have a State law for separate classes for backward children. Many can spend a comparatively short time in an institution and be safely turned out again to become self-supporting in the world, and many are sufficiently on the border-line so that they can get along comparatively well without separate or institutional training.

COLONY PLAN WORKS WELL

Of course there is always danger. Of course it would be better if every feebleminded person in the State was watched from the time of his birth to the time of his death by some authority, but we are not talking of the millennium and we are trying to arrive at some sensible and proper conclusion. Every man with whom we have talked, in a position to know, has told us that there are certain families which have regularly produced mental defectives who are dangerous to the community, who constantly reproduce defectives like themselves, and who should always be confined in institutions. We also learn that there are many others who with proper surroundings will live their lives harmlessly, to a certain extent helpfully, and who will not necessarily reproduce their own defects. It is rather difficult for a layman in a few short months to attempt to absorb the conclusions of experts who have been working on this problem for years. We have not learned all there is to learn. We do not regard our conclusions as infallible. We do not feel that we should today say that the State should do one particular thing. We need more time for study.

Very interesting experiments are being carried out. The experiment at Rome of forming a number of different colonies both of men and women is the greatest advance along this line. Students, practical men such as Dr. Fernald, are interested in this experiment and a little fearful that it is being carried too far, although it is only a development of a system which they themselves are using in Massachusetts. It may be going too far but, at this time of stress, it is adding to the available labor in the State of New York with a minimum of danger to these unfortunates. It is helping to make them self-supporting. It is relieving the State to that extent from its burdens and it is increasing the number of those who can be cared for by that one institution materially.

A CENSUS NEEDED

My own conclusions as nearly as I can formulate them now are these: We have already taken care of our lowest grades of mental defectives. Our problem is to take care not only of these but of all the others in the State who need institutional care. Until we have more exact information on the actual numbers who need this care we cannot plan as to new institutions. Therefore our first necessity is to get not only a census of our feebleminded but also information as to their quality and antecedents. This is not as difficult an adventure as it seems. We can use the machinery of our schools and courts and the only new machinery which is needed is that of some central authority to receive and tabulate the reports furnished by these agencies. Having found the extent of our problem we should then decide on the best way to solve it. It will do no harm and furthermore it will do great good to study this a little longer.

COMPLETE LETCHWORTH VILLAGE

Letchworth Village must be completed as soon as possible. Newark, should, I think, be enlarged, but whether men, women and children should be taken there or only women and children is still a question. When these two institutions are completed to their highest capacity we can take up the question of new institutions with the certainty that at that time we will have more light on the subject and run less risk of doing something which we will later regret. Personally I do not think that the State should ever build another institution like Letchworth. The cost of Letchworth Village complete will be four million dollars, and this provides for only three thousand, a per capita cost of $1,333. There is no necessity for the State to build buildings for the housing of feebleminded which are more expensively constructed in every way than you or I would ever think of building for ourselves. It may be said and is said that the up-keep of a building of stone, cement, tile and polished hard wood is less than the up-keep of a building less expensively constructed. Very likely that is true but it is very hard to convince the ordinary hard-headed citizen that it is necessary to house its unfortunates more expensively than he would ever think of housing himself.

The State of course can take whatever pride is coming to it, that it has the most modern, up-to-date, luxurious institution of any state in the world but this pride cannot be considered as evidence of the State's common sense. Whether a one story building costs more or less than a two story building both in initial construction and up-keep is a moot question. But anyone who has built knows that stone construction is the most expensive in the world and anyone who has seen the farm colonies attached to the feebleminded institutions where a white painted farmhouse with green blinds has been made to serve for perhaps twenty inmates will realize that the institution built of stone on modern designs can never have the homelike qualities of the white painted farmhouse. I believe in building well.

I believe that every institution built by the State should be a source of pride. But I also believe that houses of one or two stories built of less expensive material, but pretty, simple and comfortable, kept, as every State institution (and I say it with pride) is kept, immaculately neat and clean, would equally be a source of pride to the State and would be a real home and consequently of real benefit to the inmates. The further we get from the institutional atmosphere the nearer I believe we get to the happiness and well-being of the inmates.

I also believe that every institution should have facilities for research. Perhaps most important of all I believe that there should be co-operation between the different institutions of the State; that there should be some kind of central control and that the State should adopt a policy looking to the care of its feebleminded just as distinct and comprehensive as the State policy looking toward the care of the insane.

I will not try to go into the questions of the cause of or the hereditary qualities of feeblemindedness. I have heard enough to make me certain in my own mind that in a large proportion of the cases feeblemindedness may be inherited, that in a certain other proportion of cases it cannot. I realize that if the reproduction from families which are regularly producing feebleminded off-springs could be stopped we would largely although never entirely do away with this menace. We must see to it however that at this time we make no mistakes. Our money and our labor are urgently needed toward the prosecution of the war which is today the one matter of supreme importance; and the State should undertake no expenditure and no building program except for matters of urgent necessity.

We made a large start last year on the completion of Letchworth Village. That work should be continued but I am not in favor of commencing a new institution until we know exactly what that institution should be. There has been also an insistent demand for a new institution for defective delinquents. It is a question whether we need such an institution. It might be better to develop in existing institutions facilities for the care of these delinquents and possibly to make our existing institution at Napanoch a

centre for such development. I am heartily in favor however of proceeding as soon as possible to make some provision for this class.

I will not attempt any conclusion as to the necessity of districting the State and establishing clinics. These matters can well be left to the time when a comprehensive scheme can be devised establishing an entirely new State policy. We as a Commission must digest the material already gathered and study the new matter constantly coming to our attention. We do not intend to jump in the dark and must feel our way lest we make a serious misstep, but I can assure you that if we can carry out the program indicated as to Letchworth and Newark we will be losing no time; for the State will be going as fast as it can in this critical period of increasing taxes and decreasing revenues, and you have the assurance that this problem so long avoided is now to the fore, that this Commission is using its best effort to obey the law which created it and that it hopes by its activities and the results finally achieved, to justify its existence.

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